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ABSTRACT

After a review of the student protests of the past, it is predicted that: (1) student activism will continue to be a fact to reckon with; (2) visceral unrest will on occasion emerge but, in the U.S. at least, will seldom express itself violently; (3) student criticism of educational practices will be increasingly recognized as a valuable resource and will be facilitated by better channels of faculty-student communication; (4) during troubled times student idealists will take stands on public issues; and (5) later, these student idealists will either become important members of progressive movements or pessimistic reactionaries. (Author/KE)

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STUDENT UNREST IN PERSPECTIVE*

By

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Parents, professors, and politicians troubled by today's student unrest can take heart from the knowledge that collegians have been ever thus. Full of vitality as yet unharnessed to the work of the world, students have frequently rebelled against authority; and sometimes they have become violent. In fact, violence has been fairly frequent during the long history of higher education which extends back in identifiable institutions to the founding of Plato's Academy in 387 B.C.

The fourth century A.D. can be cited illustratively. Students who disapproved of their professors' politics invaded their lecture rooms and started fights, threw mud in their faces on the streets, and dragged them out of bed to dunk them in any available body of water. Because of this kind of behavior Augustine left the higher school in Carthage where he taught and set himself up as a private teacher in Rome, but he found conditions no better there. Youthful Romans behaved just as riotously in and out of class and, to boot, cheated him out of his fees.

During the Middle Ages students acquired extensive privileges by means of riot and rebellion. In 1228, for example, the protest of Parisian students over the price of wine precipitated a town-gown battle in which the royal bodyguard killed several academics. This led both the faculty and the students of the University of Paris to leave the city en masse and to remain away for almost three years. Their absence caused such economic havoc that the king and the pope pled with them to return. A century later a tavern brawl in Oxford grew into a three-day pitched battle between students and townsmen, the toll being some fifty killed or missing in action.

Students acquired so much power in Italian universities that they fined professors if they arrived late, circumvented the lecture schedule, or failed to dismiss class on time. Indeed, it became customary for a student to be the administrative head of Italian universities from the thirteenth century until Napoleon's invasion of Italy late in the eighteenth.

Unrest has also been a characteristic of American academia since its

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earliest days. In the colonial colleges students frequently protested against the food served in commons and also against the paternalism of their clerical professors. At Yale, for instance, "students were wont to express their displeasure with their tutors by stoning their windows or attacking them with clubs if they chanced out after dark."

Thomas Jefferson sought to avert disturbances at the University of Virginia by entrusting discipline to a committee of student "censors," but soon after the opening of the University a protracted rebellion rived the idyllic air of Charlottesville. Three former presidents of the United States (Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe) sat at that time on the Virginia governing board. They had steered the new American nation through many storms, but they found recalcitrant students too much for them.

One other of many examples: I recently asked the Princeton University archivist for copies of some records of this period; he replied, "I can't send them to you because Nassau Hall has been burned down twice by students."

The refinement of American manners in general had much to do with the gradual tapering off of student violence, but perhaps even more important were the emergence of intercollegiate athletics and coeducation. Yet visceral unrest has not entirely disappeared as witness the highly publicized panty raids of the recent past. One occurred at the University of Denver in the Spring of 1964 and another at staid old Harvard two or three years earlier. The latter reversed the usual pattern: Radcliffe girls raided the Harvard dormitories. People hear little about such affairs today because a relatively new type of phenomenon has taken the front of the stage, namely, cerebral unrest, to which topic I now turn.

* * *

The emergence of the organized extracurriculum constitutes one of the most significant educational developments of the nineteenth century. Today we take it for granted, but few people know that extracurricular activities began as a form of protest: because of their intense dissatisfaction with their instruction students disengaged themselves from the curriculum and organized the extracurriculum. It has taken an uncountable number of forms, intercollegiate athletics being the most publicized. The latter began with a Harvard-Yale boat race in 1852, the first football game (Princeton vs. Rutgers) following seventeen years later. Immediately thereafter other kinds of athletics rapidly mushroomed, and so also did non-athletic enterprises.

Today the commonplace extracurriculum noticeably wanes, the essential reason being greater student involvement in the intellectual life of their colleges. Vastly improved methods of teaching have helped accomplish the change. So also have the phenomenal advances made in secondary education and the disturbed state of the world. Thus today's students are in general

infinitely more serious-minded than their predecessors.

Many students are also idealists, and their unrest has cerebral rather than visceral roots. Discontented with educational institutions and with much about society at large, they have become vigorous activists, their activism taking two forms. The first seeks to ameliorate existing procedures in either or both the educational and public arenas; the second seeks substantially to reconstruct educational, political, and other social institutions.

I particularly want to stress the point that cerebral student activism has a long history too. Although Americans have been reading for many years about its eruptions in other countries, most people believe that until now nothing comparable has happened in the United States. I shall show this to be an erroneous conception.

Consider, first, the educational arena. The boredom that bred student visceral unrest provoked some serious-minded and imaginative students into cerebral activism: they organized societies devoted to extracurricular intellectual development and camaraderie, and these in time facilitated changes in official practices and programs.

Student societies sponsored debating, the communal ownership of important books unheeded in their courses, the writing of papers for reading at their meetings, and the carrying on of modest scientific investigations. Well under way by the late eighteenth century, these ventures in self-education did a good deal more for many students than their formal studies. To illustrate, the Lyceum of Natural History, founded in 1835 by eight Williams students, cultivated the neglected sciences there; and at Dartmouth during the same period the two student literary brotherhoods owned more books (more than 16,000) than the College itself (fewer than 15,000).

The heyday of student literary and scientific groups ended about a century ago in part because fraternities, athletics, and other new-type extracurricular activities began to absorb the interests of the great majority of students and in part, to quote Professor Frederick Rudolph of Williams College:

> The colleges themselves took over some of their old purposes; built up broader collections of books, opened the libraries more than once a week, introduced respectable study in English literature, discovered history as a field of study, expanded the sciences.

In short, student educational activism helped facilitate the modernization of American colleges which began about a century ago; and the same generalization can be made about the efforts of students during the 1920's to help make education equal to the demands of this century.

Barnard College students opened that chapter during the academic year of 1921-1922. The following from a report written by a group of them epitomizes its spirit:

> Are college students persons, or are they pupils? Most colleges treat them as pupils. But in some places they seem to be demanding admission to the human race. Barnard College has a group of candidates for such a standing. The Student Curricular Committee has made public a curriculum worked out by the students which they have asked the faculty to consider as a possible substitute for the present course of study.

This initial student report had little effect at Barnard, but two years later it provided the senior editor of The Daily Dartmouth with the subject for a dynamic editorial campaign. Hammering away persistently at the defects of his alma mater, he badgered Dartmouth's president to appoint a committee of twelve seniors to make "a complete survey, review and examination of [the College's] educational processes." After several months of reading, visitation of other colleges, and serious reflection, the committee produced a printed document which had wide influence. As a result of it being quoted and commented upon by newspapers and journals of opinion, a score of other institutions within the next few years established similar student groups.

These committees also published reports which helped faculties and administrators to understand student opinion. Many of them, like the Dartmouth statement, bore immediate curricular and related fruit. The most important yield, however, ripened at Harvard: during the intervening forty years the Harvard Student Council has produced about a dozen printed reports, each on a specific educational issue. They have been a continuing channel of student-faculty communication. This helps explain, I believe, why Harvard disorders are generally milder than those at many other institutions.

The student educational activism of the past has been almost entirely ameliorative; but currently much of it, in contrast, is fervently reconstructive. Like some faculty members, they propose that educational institutions be rebuilt from the ground up. They urge — nay, demand — that boards of trustees be abandoned or manned only by faculty members and students and that administrators be limited to such functions as providing debating forums, abundant parking places, and janitorial service. The legal structure of American education together with the inescapable necessity of administrative leadership, however, preclude, I feel certain, the adoption of their basic reconstructive formulas.

More must be said later about the educational arena. Meanwhile student activism on public issues needs to be put in perspective.

American students began to take positions on public questions during the Revolution. The nine colonial colleges enrolled only about a thousand

students, but most of them forthrightly expressed their nationalistic convictions. Alexander Hamilton, for example, began his prodigious career as a student orator; and he and his associates were involved in driving out of the country the Tory president of King's College (now Columbia).

In turn, for about forty years prior to the Civil War, students North and South agitated on the issue of slavery. Oberlin College in particular developed into a dedicated abolitionist center with its own underground railroad, and at least one of its students died in a Southern prison.

After Appomattox student interest in public affairs took milder forms. Yale undergraduates in 1887, for instance, established the Yale Assembly for the purpose of discussing political and social problems. One of its organizers, Gifford Pinchot, later became a pivotal leader of the conservation movement and governor of Pennsylvania.

Soon after the turn of the century outside organizers moved into the colleges to enlist in their causes the nation's youthful elite. The first such group, the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, had its inception in New York City in 1905 under the leadership of Upton Sinclair. His associates included Clarence Darrow and Jack London, the latter of whom had just become famous because of his novels and short stories. Large numbers of students admired him; and traveling across the country, he established chapters at virtually every major institution which attracted not a few gifted students. To name three: Walter Lippmann during 1910-1911 headed the Harvard chapter; Louis Mumford belonged to the CCNY chapter; and Norman Thomas began his socialist career as a Princeton undergraduate.

World War One curbed the American socialist movement, the extreme left creating the Socialist Labor Party (Communist), the great majority of the members of the ISS moving back to traditional American political positions. The League for Industrial Democracy, its new name since the early twenties, continues to function. Other organizations, however, have become more important.

The ISS appears to have been the first invasion of the campus by outside socio-political groups -- but not the last. During the booming twenties students by and large had no more interest in the state of the world than did most of their elders. Then came the depression. I lived through its uproars as a faculty member and administrator at Ohio State University, and I observed the students there during the turmoils of the thirties. Beyond doubt, outsiders helped foment protest movements. In any case, on April 12, 1934, high school and college students across the country rebelled in a peace strike against war. They repeated it exactly a year later and again in 1936 when half a million students participated.

During this period students protested not only against war but also against the underprivileged status of unions, child labor, and in particular the sorry state of Negro civil rights. Then, as now, youthful idealists bridled against social injustice.

I do not want to overstress the importance of outside organizers. They have long been active on campuses; but many students have perennially been discontented with the state of the world and have organized themselves. It would be surprising, however, if external propagandists did not invade the campus in the present situation.

On non-military issues the student clamors of the thirties probably had some effect, but the Peace Movement did not hamper the war against the Fascist powers; and at its end the G.I. Bill of Rights deluged the colleges with several million veterans. Some of us expected that these much-matured students would be so critical of existing methods of instruction and the onrushing research emphasis of faculty members that they would rise in rebellion. We were very much mistaken. Everybody predicted a depression, and the veterans were out to acquire their degrees and find jobs before it struck. A period of apathy resulted — the so-called Silent Generation. Then in 1960 the lid blew off again.

Much more complex than in earlier periods, current student activism thrusts into both the academic and public domains. Many of its leaders, moreover, operate simultaneously in both. Their ameliorative as distinguished from their reconstructive criticisms have clearly been productive and, in my judgment, largely sound. Thus student fault-finders have made administrators and faculty members face up to the abounding impersonalism that has come to characterize higher education, the inadequacy of many teaching procedures, the devastations of the publish-or-perish syndrome, the urgent need of establishing better methods of student participation in institutional policy-making.

In these and other academic matters ameliorative activism has been a boon, and the same generalization can be made about ameliorative activities in the public arena. The students who have joined the Peace Corps or the Poverty Corps and who, while still enrolled in college, work with underpriviliged children and youths get relatively little newspaper publicity; but their numbers and effectiveness probably surpass those of the reconstructionists. Both groups, however, have helped arouse the nation's conscience concerning a number of crucial social inequities.

What about the future? It seems to me that the events of the past make several predictions reasonable. First, student activism will continue to be a fact to reckon with. Second, visceral unrest will on occasion emerge but, in the United States at least, will seldom express itself violently. Third, student criticism of educational practices will be increasingly recognized as a valuable resource and will be facilitated by better channels of faculty-student communication. Fourth, during troublous times student idealists will take stands on public issues; and their ameliorative ideas which win popular support will be productive. Fifth, when these youthful Utopians join the ranks of those past thirty whom they now disdain, they — like so many of their predecessors — will either become important members of progressive movements or pessimistic reactionaries.

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